An Investigation of Culture Specific Items in English Textbooks Taught at Iraqi State-run High Schools and Private Institutes

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**Abstract**

**Introduction:** The issue of culture has been a controversial topic in foreign language teaching. One of the best resources for familiarizing foreign language learners with another language culture is a textbook. Therefore, the current study aimed to investigate the culture-specific items in terms of Kachru's (1985) concentric circles in English textbooks used in state-run schools and private language institutes in Iraq.

**Methodology:** Two textbooks of *New Interchange* series and *English for Iraq* series were analyzed in terms of their culture-specific items using Newmark's (1988) framework. Cultural items related to categories of ecology, material culture, social culture, organizations, customs and ideas, gestures and habits as well as anthroponyms, were identified, and their frequency counts were computed. The Chi-square test was run to test the significance of each category.

**Results:** The results of a Chi-square test indicated that there were no significant differences between *New Interchange* and *English for Iraq* series in terms of culture-specific items related to "the expanding circle". However, a significant difference was found between the two series of textbooks as to the culture-specific items related to "the inner circle". With regard to cultural items related to the Iraqi native culture, Organizations, Customs, Activities, Procedures, and Concepts were found to be the most frequent items, while Anthroponyms turned out to be the least frequent cultural items reflected in *English for Iraq* series of textbooks.

**Conclusion:** It can be concluded that English textbooks published in English speaking countries (inner circle) and those published in non-native countries, such as Iraq, include items from expanding circle countries.

**Keywords:** Culture, Culture specific Items, Expanding circle, Inner circle

1. Introduction

Phenomena such as globalization, diversity, and intercultural interactions have urged the need for the study of language and culture. It seems that communities are more concerned about their unique cultural identities as globalization has grown throughout the world. Several researchers have focused on the relationship between culture, language, and identity (e.g., Bucholtz & Hall, 2004). The issue of culture in second language learning is, by its nature, a controversial one although culture is an inevitable part of any language. Campbell (2000) believes that the ability to move across cultural boundaries is an advantage rather than a disadvantage. Peterson and Coltrane (2003) suggest that language and culture are so interlinked that ignoring culture specific elements of language may cause failure in understanding and communication. If such familiarity leads to alienation from one’s native and home culture, then it may cause social and cultural problems.

The importance of culture in English as a foreign language (EFL) education becomes more evident when individuals understand that culture is necessary for communication. One of the best resources for familiarizing EFL learners with another language culture is textbook. Students take the cultural information from textbook more seriously and valid as they have the perception that they are valid sources of information. Textbook evaluation in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT) has not received the attention it deserves. There seems to be a lack of literature on evaluation and analysis of textbooks in ELT. However, existing literature shows that researchers use...
various tools for the evaluation of textbooks. Checklists, scoring assessment method, and evaluation guides can be used to evaluate books.

In the Iraqi ELT context, the textbooks used in state schools are assigned and prepared by the Iraqi Ministry of education. Private language institutes can choose from a world-wide textbook series developed in one of the English-speaking countries. The English textbook series for the state-run high-schools is English for Iraq series.

Textbook evaluation in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT) has not received the attention it deserves. There seems to be a lack of literature on the evaluation and analysis of textbooks in ELT. However, existing literature shows that researchers use various tools for the evaluation of textbooks. Checklists, scoring assessment method, and evaluation guides can be used as tools for evaluating books.

Kachru (1985) has divided the world of English into three circles: “inner circle”, referring to countries in which English is spoken as a native language (i.e., United Kingdom, USA, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia) “the outer circle”, including countries with a colonial background, which are diverse in culture and language; however, still English has an important role in people’s communication.

Iraq is a conservative country in terms of respect for religions and cultures. The majority of the people in Iraq are Muslims, and some of their social values might be in contrast with Western cultural values. Studies are needed to take account of cultural issues involved in foreign language learning in Iraq.

This study aims at investigating the representation of cultural items in English textbooks taught in the Iraqi ELT context. It will examine how foreign language learning deals with the native culture of Iraq and to what extent the Iraqi native culture and Western culture are reflected in foreign language teaching textbooks.

The study aims at evaluating the Iraqi English textbooks used in state-run schools and private language schools from cultural perspective. Textbooks will be evaluated in terms of culturally specific items using the framework proposed by Newmark (1988). Comparisons will also be made between the textbook used in public schools and the one used in private language institutes. Kachru’s concentric circles – the inner, outer and expanding circles - will be discussed.

The study can be significant in terms of its contribution to the literature on textbook evaluation and the issue of culture in foreign language textbooks. Both the negative and positive sides of the cultural content of Iraqi English textbooks can be further analyzed and discussed. It is hoped that novel ideas for finding new frameworks for culture content evaluation of textbooks will be born throughout the process of textbook evaluation.

Cognitive and semiotic views of culture are different in the ways they conceptualize culture. Cognitive perspectives of culture have been criticized for looking at culture as a psychological construct lacking any social dimension. Semiotic perspectives highlight the relationship between language and culture and emphasize the role of context and interaction. Such understanding of culture may help use to learn about the mechanisms of intercultural communication. Theories of culture and language have included dynamicity and fluidity as the main components of language-culture relationship.

Risager (2007, p. 183) states that communicative events include the mixture of language and culture “a local integration of linguistic, languacultural, discursive and other cultural flows in more or less differing social networks”. Baker (2009) stresses that culture should be understood as a dynamic phenomenon in the EFL context. This issue becomes more important in English language teaching because English is not connected to one culture.

There is a close interrelationship between language and culture so they are characterized as being synonyms (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992). Language is employed to show our cultural thoughts, beliefs as well as a means to communicate. In fact, language is a component of a culture and culture is a component of a language (Brown, 2000).

Cultural contents in EFL instruction should consider globalization’s impact as it leads to the problem of what culture an L2 teacher should cover. It is unrealistic to learn how to communiqué in a foreign language without learning about its culture. Integrating appropriate local cultural contents into culture learning modules in the FL classes can be very beneficial to language learning. An analysis of textbooks in foreign language contexts can tell us how local and foreign cultures are reflected in curriculums. A study conducted by Ching (2010) elaborates on two essential advantages emanating from incorporating the second culture in EFL materials and classrooms. First, the incorporation of culture contributes to students’ sense of reality as they contemplate the lifestyle, the target community’s behavior patterns, and values of real life. Second, the incorporation of second culture will satisfy learners’ needs, including traveling to English-speaking countries to get a job or begin a friendly relationship. Therefore, textbook selection, design, and assessment play an important role in language classes for teachers and researchers. According to Tok (2010), ELT textbooks influence the students’ perception of L2 learning and affect their performance in the classrooms.

There are numerous types of English textbooks available in the market; however, the inclusion of local culture in these textbooks is still controversial.

The relationship between culture and language can be reflected in the use of words and phrases that are conventionally referred to as culture specific items (CSIs). The definition for CSI has been a difficult one because of its intuitive nature (Aixela, 1997). It can be inferred that CSIs are troublesome for second and foreign language learners due to the gap between the source language and the target language. Newmark (1988) groups the culture-specific items into six categories, including Ecology, Material Culture, Social Culture, Organizations, Customs, Activities, Procedures, Concepts; Anthroponyms, and Gestures and Habits.

Since textbooks can introduce the cultures of different people and locations to learners to increase their cultural

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understanding and their competence in intercultural communication (Lee, 2012), it is important to be aware of domain presentations. Kachru (1985) defines the three circles (concentric-circles) to show "the types of spread, patterns of acquisition and functional domains in which English is used across cultures and languages" (p.12). Teaching inner circle varieties, using Kachru’s (1992) term, corroborates the premise of native authority and, in accordance, looks down on the position of other circles (Matsuda, 2003). Given that the examination of multiple ELT textbooks in terms of linguistic and cultural hegemony revealed that English is still being taught as an inner circle language (Matsuda, 2002), it is of utmost significance to unveil the cultural presentation in the ELT textbook. Therefore, the current study aimed to compare two textbooks of Interchange and English for Iraq series used in state-run schools and private language schools from a cultural perspective. To this end, the textbooks were evaluated in terms of CSIs and concentric circles.

2. Methodology

2.1. Design of the study

The study employed a qualitative text-analysis design to examine the textbooks with regard to the representation of CSIs. The use and frequency of CSIs were described and compared in the two text books.

2.2. Materials

The two textbooks of Interchange (Richards, 2005) and English for Iraq (MacBurnie, 2013) series used in state-run schools and private language schools were analyzed in this study. Of note, the books were developed for students at different levels, including elementary, intermediate, and advanced. The rationale behind choosing these two textbook series was that they are taught extensively in Iraq.

2.3. Framework of the analysis

In this study, CSIs to categories of "Ecology" (winds, plains, hills), "Material Culture" (food, clothes, houses and towns, transport), "Organizations, customs and ideas" as well as "Gestures and Habits" suggested by Newmark (1988) were identified and their frequency counts were computed. In addition, Kachru’s (1992) division of inner, outer, and expanding circles unveil the elements which bear some tones of cultural and linguistic imperialism in addition, Kachru’s (1992) model was applied. The analysis of the book included sentences and images of each unit. After the classification, the frequency of each category was calculated based on the number of cultural occurrences. Two raters were recruited for this purpose and the degree of the agreement between the two raters was calculated using Holst’s (1969) coefficient of reliability. The Chi-square test was run using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), version 22 to check the significance of the differences.

3. Results

The purpose of the study was identification of cultural elements in English textbooks taught in mainstream education and private institutes in Iraq. It was attempted to relate the CSIs to the Kachru’s concentric circles.

The CSIs related to Ecology category are recognized for frequency count analysis. As seen in Figure 1A, above, the names Scotland and Maclaren’s Castle are names related to this category. Material Culture is the second CSI category and includes names of foods, clothes and housing.

Figure 1B is an excerpt from the English for Iraq series containing CSIs related to Material Culture. The names of certain foods like beef curry and burgers are CSIs related to Material Culture category in the English for Iraq series. In Figure 2, above, the names for certain foods are associated with English culture. The CSIs that relate to concepts about work and leisure in particular cultures.

The third CSI category is Social Culture, which deals with how people interact with the world around them. Many leisure activities are mainly associated with western culture, for instance, chat show and soap opera are names that are mostly associated with Western and English culture (Figure 1C). The fourth category, Cultural Items, includes items related to political, social, legal, religious, and artistic concepts. Figure 1D shows how this is reflected in textbooks.

Ramadan is a religious event for Muslims and Iraq is one of the most religious countries in the world in terms of its religious beliefs and activities. Figure 2A presents a reading/writing exercise about a cultural event in Iraqi culture. This is a CSI related to Organizations, Customs, Activities, Procedures, and Concepts (OCAPC) as it relates to the concept of Ramadan. Figure 2B indicates how CSIs related to Gestures and Habits are related to one another and how they are taught in textbooks.

Figure 2A illustrates greeting behaviors that are culturally loaded. For instance, bowing is a type of greeting in Japan and a pad on the back is common in Mexico. The last CSI category is Anthroponyms which refers to the name of actual people in a particular culture. Figure 2B shows the names of Jet Li and Britney Spears as CSIs related to Anthroponyms. Jet Li is a movie celebrity that frequently appears in Hollywood films and Spears is a well-known singer in Europe and North America.

After closely reading the two English series, each instance of CSIs, including Ecology, Material culture, OCAPC were coded. The coded items were added up to come up
with total frequencies for each CSI. Tables 1 to 2 shows the frequency counts of CSIs for New Interchange and English for Iraq.

The most frequent culture item in Intro-Interchange was OCAPC followed by Material Culture and Gestures and Habits in descending order. Social Culture-Work and Leisure was found to be the most popular cultural item in Interchange books 1-3, and the entire New Interchange Series. Total score for each CSIs was calculated by adding up the frequencies of each single category across the New Interchange series.

Table 3 shows the most frequent culture items in English for Iraq 1 were Social Culture-Work, Leisure and Anthroponyms (frequency Counts) and Gestures and Habits (frequency counts). According to Table 3 it is SOCAPC followed by OCAPC, then Material Culture, then Ecology, then Anthroponyms. Table 3 shows that the most frequent culture item in English for Iraq 5 was OCAPC followed by Social Culture-Work and Leisure and Material Culture, in descending order. According to Table 3, the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Culture-specific items</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ecology</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4.65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material culture</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>29.81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social culture-work and leisure</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>12.11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizations, Customs, Activities, Procedures, Concepts</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>37.57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthroponyms</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>8.07%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gestures and Habits</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>7.76%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2.
Frequencies and Percentages of Culture Specific Items in Interchange Books 1-3 and the Entire New Interchange Series

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Culture-specific items</th>
<th>Books</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>Ecology</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interchange 1</td>
<td>53</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interchange 2</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>7.03%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interchange 3</td>
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<tr>
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<td>22.06%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interchange 2</td>
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<td>32.59%</td>
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<td>85</td>
<td>31.48%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interchange 1</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>6.76%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interchange 2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4.44%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interchange 3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anthroponyms</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interchange 1</td>
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<td>11.03%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interchange 2</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>8.88%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interchange 3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Entire New Interchange Series</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>8.83%</td>
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Table 3.
Frequencies and Percentages of Culture Specific Items in English for Iraq 1-6 and All the English for Iraq Books

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Culture-specific items</th>
<th>Books</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ecology</td>
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<tr>
<td>English for Iraq 1</td>
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<td>14.28%</td>
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<tr>
<td>English for Iraq 2</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>16.95%</td>
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<tr>
<td>English for Iraq 3</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>15.11%</td>
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<tr>
<td>English for Iraq 4</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>13.14%</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>English for Iraq 5</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>13.58%</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>English for Iraq 6</td>
<td>29</td>
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<tr>
<td>All the English for Iraq Books</td>
<td>192</td>
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<td>English for Iraq 2</td>
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<td>Social culture-work and leisure</td>
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<tr>
<td>English for Iraq 1</td>
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<td>21.76%</td>
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<td>English for Iraq 3</td>
<td>85</td>
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<td>81</td>
<td>32.27%</td>
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<td>73</td>
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<tr>
<td>English for Iraq 6</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>32.28%</td>
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<tr>
<td>All the English for Iraq Books</td>
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<td>28.49%</td>
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<td>Anthroponyms</td>
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<td>English for Iraq 6</td>
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<tr>
<td>All the English for Iraq Books</td>
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<td>Gestures and Habits</td>
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<tr>
<td>English for Iraq 6</td>
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<tr>
<td>All the English for Iraq Books</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>5.73%</td>
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</table>
The expanding circle refers to English language items found in countries where English is expanding such as China, Egypt, Japan, Korea, Saudi Arabia, Taiwan, etc. The answer to this question was sought by separating CSIs associated with the expanding circle. Table 4 shows the frequency of CSIs in English for Iraq Series. Culture items related to expanding circle are frequently found in books at more advanced levels. The more advanced is the level of English for Iraqi learners, the more frequent are the CSIs in expanding circles. Table 4 shows frequency counts of 9.12%, 10.47%, 18.58%, 19.25%, 20.60%, and 21.95% for English for Iraq book series 1-6, respectively.

Table 4.
Frequency Counts and Percentages of Culture Specific Items Related to the Expanding Circle in English for Iraq and Interchange book series

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English for Iraq</th>
<th>Expanding circle</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frequency</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interchange 2</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interchange 3</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most frequently spoken about book for Iraq 6 was OCAAPC. The total score for each CSI was calculated by adding up the frequencies of each single category across the books in the Iraq Series.

To investigate how frequently English for Iraq series reflects items associated with Iraqi native culture, the CSIs native to Iraqi culture were identified and counted. Table 6 shows the frequency counts and percentages of such items as well as their relative importance in Iraqi culture.

Table 6.
The Frequency Counts and Percentages of Culture Specific Items Native to Iraqi Culture

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Culture-specific items</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ecology</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>16.66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material culture</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>18.42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social culture-work and leisure</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>14.63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizations, Customs, Activities, Procedures, Concepts</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>27.19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthroponyms</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10.52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gestures and Habits</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>13.15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As can be seen, CSIs in inner circle had frequency counts of 75 (17.04%) in English for Iraq 1, 63 (14.31%), and 86 (19.54%) in Iraq 4, 89 (20.22) in Iraqi 5, and 52 (11.81%) in Iraq 6.

Culture specific items in the inner circle had frequency counts of 113 (15.73%) in Intro Interchange, 131 (18.24%) in Interchange 1, 265 (36.90%) in Interchanging 2, and 209 (29.10%) in Interchange 3. Culture specific items were most frequent in Interchange books 2 and 3, and least frequent in the intro and interchanging 1.

To investigate how frequently English for Iraq series reflects items associated with Iraqi culture, the CSIs native to Iraqi culture were identified and counted. Table 7 shows the results of the Chi-square test between Interchange and English for Iraq series. As can be seen, there were no significant differences between New Interchange and English for Iraq series in expanding circles (X² = 2.917, p = .042), but a significant difference was found between the two textbooks in inner circles (X² = 2.502, p = .01).

Table 7.
The Result of Chi-square Between Interchange and English for Iraq series regarding the Inner and Expanding Circle

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Degree of freedom</th>
<th>Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expanding</td>
<td>Pearson Chi-Square</td>
<td>2.917&lt;sup&gt;+&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Likelihood Ratio</td>
<td>2.688</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Linear-by-Linear Association</td>
<td>1.061</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inner</td>
<td>Pearson Chi-Square</td>
<td>2.502</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Likelihood Ratio</td>
<td>2.460</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Linear-by-Linear Association</td>
<td>1.665</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. Discussion

The present study aimed at identifying CSIs in relation to the Kachru’s concentric circles in two different English textbook series. One of series was that of New Interchange and the other one was English for Iraq, which is taught in Iraqi mainstream education.

The analysis of data indicated that all culturally specific items were present in Interchange series and English for Iraq series. The OCAPC was found to be the most frequent one and Anthroponyms the least frequent one with regard to culture items native to Iraqi culture. Culture items related to expanding circle were more frequently found at more advanced levels of New Interchange books and English for Iraq books. The main finding of the study indicated the presence of CSIs in both New Interchange series and English for Iraq series and the fact that both series included cultural items in the expanding and inner circles are discussed. In other words, the presence of CSIs not exclusive to English-speaking countries like UK, US, Australia, and New Zealand indicates that English for Iraq series has followed a more global approach in including cultural items. It can also be construed that Iraq is joining the expanding circle of English by contributing the global nature of English rather than instructing and expecting the narrower form from of English exclusive to UK, US, Australia, and New Zealand. The significant growth in the number of ELF speakers along the use of English in the expanding circle, has led to many questions about the English in Expanding circle. For example, there have been several research studies and discussions about EFL speakers’ attitudes and integrated EFL pedagogical approaches (Jenkins, 2006; McKay, 2003; Rubdy & Saraceni, 2006; Seidlhofer 2006). Although New Interchange series is an American English textbook, it should not be forgotten that firstly American society is a multi-lingual and multicultural society, and secondly, English in expanding circle has grown to a level that it is no longer considered an outsider. It can be claimed that English is so spread today that the distinction between standard and non-standard English can hardly be achieved (e.g., Brutt-Griffler, 2002; Kachru, 1982; Lowenberg, 2000).

Furthermore, evidence suggests that English belonging to the inner circle is highly valued by English learners in outer or expanding circle of English. Seidlhofer (2004) points to “unstable equilibrium” (p. 209), which is a situation in which non-native speakers outnumber native speakers, but native speakers of English are still praised for being native English speakers. Native speakers, for instance, are enjoying from having special status (Graddol, 1999) and various material and psychological benefits.

The study revealed that English for Iraq series contained numerous instances of Iraqi culture although they did not outnumber the native and international cultural items. This can be good news as students may not develop the idea that English is just for English culture. Kırkgöz and Ağcam (2011) explored the English textbooks in primary education in Turkey and found that they include many cultural items specific to Turkish culture. However, contrary to the current findings, they found that cultural items specific to Turkish culture outnumber those related to Native English speakers (e.g. Americans and British).

5. Conclusion

English textbooks published in English-speaking countries like UK, US, Australia, and New Zealand include cultural items from expanding circle countries such as Iraq. It can be concluded that English for Iraq series not only included cultural items related to English-speaking countries, but also includes culture-specific items that are native to the Iraqi culture. Overall, it is concluded that English for Iraq has adequately dealt with cultural issues in English language teaching.

The findings of the study need to be presented to the teachers and other decision-makers in the field of ELT and be discussed with regard to the instruction, priority, and appropriateness of cultural items in English textbooks.

The findings of the study can inform the material developers about the cultural content of English textbooks. Such knowledge about the cultural content of English textbooks may inform the material developers how to achieve the balance in the cultural content of the English textbooks.

Finally, it can be inferred that despite the privilege given to native-like speaking and behaving in many non-English speaking countries, English language and culture do not need to be limited to inner circle countries (those countries in which English is spoken as the first language).

Declarations

Competing interests

None.

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Meinhof (Eds.), English in a changing world (AILA Review), 13, 57-68.